



The Story of a Good Brahmin

VOLTAIRE

Musean Translation

MOUSEIA



The Story of a Good Brahmin



VOLTAIRE

Musean Translation

Translated by Michael Berardi

MOUSEIA

THIS EDITION

Complete machine-assisted Musean translation directly from the French of the complete ten-paragraph tale, Beuchot edition (1829), checked against the printed pages. Later editorial notes are omitted.

TRANSLATOR

Michael Berardi

THE WORK

Written 1759 · Philosophical tale

SOURCE

Original text from archive.org.

GAPS AND UNCERTAINTIES

The source edition dates the tale 1759; the acquisition brief gives 1761. The period follows the edition, not an independently established first-publication date.

Mouseia · mouseia.org

Edition dated 26 October 2026

The Story of a Good Brahmin



On my travels I met an old brahmin, a man of great wisdom, wit, and learning. He was rich as well, and all the wiser for it: lacking nothing, he had no need to deceive anyone. Three beautiful wives, each intent on pleasing him, managed his household admirably; and when he was not amusing himself with his wives, he devoted himself to philosophy.

Near his handsome, richly appointed house, with its lovely gardens, lived an old Indian woman, bigoted, foolish, and rather poor.

One day the brahmin said to me, “I wish I had never been born.” I asked him why. He replied, “I have studied for forty years, and they are forty years lost. I teach others and know nothing myself. This condition fills my soul with such humiliation and disgust that life is unbearable. I was born; I live in time; and I do not know what time is. I stand at a point between two eternities, as our sages say, and I have no idea of eternity. I am composed of matter; I think; yet I have never been able to discover what produces thought. I do not know whether my understanding is simply a faculty within me, like walking or digestion, or whether I think with my head as I grasp with my hands. Not only is the source of my thought unknown to me; the source of my movements is equally hidden. I do not know why I exist. Yet every day people question me on all these matters. I must answer; I have nothing sound to say. I speak at length, and when I have finished I am left bewildered and ashamed of myself.

“It is worse still when I am asked whether Brahma was brought into being by Vishnu, or whether both are eternal. God is my witness that I know nothing about it, and my answers show it plainly. ‘Ah, reverend father,’ people say to me, ‘teach us how evil comes to flood the whole earth.’ I am as troubled as those who ask. Sometimes I tell them that everything is for the best; but those whom war has ruined and maimed believe nothing of it, nor do I. I return home crushed by my curiosity and my ignorance. I read our ancient books, and they deepen my darkness. I speak to my companions: some tell me to enjoy life and laugh at humanity; others think they know something and lose themselves in extravagant notions. Everything intensifies the pain I feel. At times I am on the verge of despair when I reflect that, after all my searching, I know neither where I come from, nor what I am, nor where I shall go, nor what will become of me.”

This good man’s condition truly grieved me: no one was more reasonable or more sincere. I understood that the more light he had in his understanding and feeling in his heart, the more unhappy he was.

That same day I saw the old woman who lived nearby. I asked whether she had ever been distressed at not knowing how her soul was made. She did not even understand my question. Never for a single moment of her life had she reflected on any of the matters that tormented the brahmin. She believed wholeheartedly in Vishnu’s transformations; and provided she could occasionally have water from the Ganges to wash in, she thought herself the happiest of women.

Struck by this poor creature’s happiness, I returned to my philosopher and said, “Are you not ashamed to be unhappy when an old automaton lives at your very door, thinking of nothing and perfectly content?” “You are right,” he replied. “A hundred times I have told myself that I would be happy if I were as foolish as my neighbor; and yet I would not want such happiness.”

This answer from my brahmin impressed me more deeply than anything else. I examined myself and saw that I too would not have wanted to be happy on condition of being a fool.

I put the matter to some philosophers, and they agreed with me. "And yet," I said, "there is a tremendous contradiction in this way of thinking. After all, what is at stake? Being happy. What does it matter whether one has intelligence or is a fool? There is more: those content with their existence are quite certain of their contentment; those who reason are not so certain that they reason well. It is therefore clear," I said, "that we ought to choose to have no common sense if that common sense contributes even a little to our unhappiness." Everyone agreed with me, and yet I found no one willing to accept the bargain of becoming a fool in order to become content. From this I concluded that, much as we value happiness, we value reason still more.

Yet on reflection it seems that to prefer reason to happiness is to be very unreasonable. How, then, can this contradiction be explained? Like all the others. There is much to be said about that.